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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.**

**The Threat to America from the South:  
Iran and Self-Propelled Fully Submersible Watercraft**

**by**

**Douglas G. Steil**

**LT USN**

**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A significant threat to the security of United States exists in the U.S. Southern Command Area of Responsibility. Iran has infiltrated the Western Hemisphere through its economic and political relationships with Central and South American states, most notably Venezuela. These relationships have permitted Iran-sponsored organizations, Hezbollah and the Iran Republican Guard Corps – Qods Force, to permeate the region. Concurrently, drug trafficking organizations implement self-propelled fully-submersible watercraft to covertly transport cargo. The combination of this technology with state-sponsored terrorists provides an opportunity for the penetration of U.S. defenses to place a weapon of mass destruction/explosion on U.S. territory. This paper examines advantages and shortfalls in the command relationships and assets available to U.S. Southern Command and U.S. Northern Command to adequately respond to this threat of attack.

## **Introduction**

The Caribbean Sea has been utilized for nefarious purposes for hundreds of years. Pirates, rum runners, and smugglers sailed the Caribbean to move their precious and illegal cargo. In contemporary times, the Caribbean Sea hosts the lines of operation for narco-traffickers moving their product into the United States. Adaptable and well-financed by the sale of their product, drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) annually move over a thousand metric tons of illicit drugs across the Caribbean Sea and Eastern Pacific Ocean.<sup>1</sup> Increased operational commitments throughout the world have shifted the focus of the United States away from the Caribbean Sea, and the DTOs operations continue almost unabated.

DTOs have developed sophisticated means of transporting their product. The use of aircraft and “go-fasts”<sup>2</sup> is transitioning to the self-propelled semi-submersible (SPSS). These fully enclosed boats operate with very little surface area above the waterline, greatly reducing the craft’s radar signature. Yet despite their significantly smaller cross-section, they are visible from airborne assets. The next generation of smuggling craft, the self-propelled fully-submersible (SPFS) reduces that Achilles heel even more by requiring only a minimal broach of the surface. This new development is a significant threat to the safety of the United States.

South America, aside from the known DTO threat, is also home to a rising number of state and state-sponsored actors with a shared interest in the erosion of the strength and authority of the United States.<sup>3</sup> President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela is unabashedly vocal with his anti-American sentiment and has created economic and political networks among

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s observations while assigned to Joint Interagency Task Force-South from December 2004-June 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Commercial recreation boats modified for high speeds

<sup>3</sup> Norman A. Bailey, “What are the Persians Doing Over Here?” Challenges to Security in the Hemisphere Task Force, University of Miami Center for Hemisphere Policy, 30 March 2010.

allied states in Latin America through the Bolivian Alternative for America (ALBA).<sup>4</sup> Iran has increased its economic and diplomatic relationships with Central and South American states, Venezuela first among them, to expand its influence outside of the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> The relationship between Venezuela and Iran, nurtured by shared anti-American animosity, promotes the penetration of the Western Hemisphere by state sponsored terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and the Iran Republic Guard Corps-Qods Forces (IRGC-QF).<sup>6</sup> The presence of these militant groups coupled with the technology of SPFS is a danger as it provides adversaries with a means to approach and potentially attack the continental United States. Iran's infiltration into the Western Hemisphere demands the United States cultivate a capable joint military response to the SPFS threat in the Caribbean Sea in order to prevent an attack on the United States by state-sponsored terrorists.

## **The Threat**

### **DTOs and SPFSs**

DTOs are extraordinarily adaptable, able to incorporate new technology and methods for smuggling their product into the United States. Traditional maritime transit routes begin at the source country, historically Columbia or Ecuador, and extend up the Eastern Pacific or the Western Caribbean Sea.<sup>7</sup> The purpose is to get the cargo out of the host country and into Central American countries with less stringent or skilled drug enforcement capabilities. Mexico is popular due to its extremely long coast line and the shared border with the United

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<sup>4</sup> Ray Walser, "Terrorism, Insurgency, and Drugs Still Threaten America's Southern Flank," *Backgrounder*, The Heritage Foundation, no.2152, June 30, 2008, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Office of National Drug Control Policy, [http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/international/factsht/transit\\_zone\\_interdic\\_op.html](http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/international/factsht/transit_zone_interdic_op.html) (accessed 29 April 2011).

States. Smugglers maximize the time at sea or in the air away from sovereign territory to reduce the amount of time on the ground. Over time, DTOs have utilized freighters, “go-fast” small boats, and aircraft to move their product northward, changing methods to circumvent interdiction assets of the United States. Consequently, DTOs have adapted again to move more narcotics per shipment while capitalizing on stealth.

DTO’s first foray into low observable craft was self-propelled semi-submersibles (SPSS). Resembling the ironclads of the Civil War, these craft sit low in the water, reducing their radar and visual profile. By channeling the exhaust through the water, these craft have an even lower infra-red signature.<sup>8</sup> Forgoing speed for stealth, DTOs designed these craft larger to carry significantly more drugs. Where “go-fasts” on average carry approximately one to two metric tons of cocaine per trip, SPSS are designed to carry upwards of fifteen metric tons.<sup>9</sup> Additionally their stealth and more efficient cruising speed provide SPSS with a range between 1,500-2,000 miles, reducing or eliminating the need to refuel between source countries and Mexico.<sup>10</sup> This has led to an increase in their use, with some estimates accounting for roughly 30 percent of the cocaine traffic.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the loss of one of these craft to law enforcement interdiction results in millions of dollars lost to the DTO. The next evolution naturally is to make the craft fully submersible.

SPFS technology undercuts the current detect and monitor capability of the United States, and it can be proliferated. Visual identification is reduced to almost nil because SPFS

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<sup>8</sup> Douglas Kash and Eli White, “A New Law Counters the Semisubmersible Smuggling Threat” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/march-2010/the-semisubmersible-smuggling-threat> (accessed 2 April 2011).

<sup>9</sup> CAPT Wade Wilkerson, USN, “A New Underwater Threat”, *Proceedings*, 14 October, 2008. <http://www.military.com/forums/0,15240,177265,00.html> (accessed 3 April 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Southern Command 2009 Posture Statement, p. 25.

travel nine feet below the surface of the water with only a small periscope and snorkel breaching the surface to permit navigation and the intake of fresh air for the diesel engines and the crew.<sup>12</sup> According to ADM Joseph Nimmich, the Coast Guard director of Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-S), SPFS give off very little acoustic signature and are capable of traveling 2,000 miles with a cargo of up to 15 metric tons.<sup>13</sup> The ability to covertly move 15 tons across the Caribbean Sea is a capability that will not go unrecognized by organizations interested in transporting more than drugs. The Federal Bureau of Investigation published a paper specifically citing the danger this technology poses, namely the ability for organizations to smuggle WMD/E or terrorists into the continental United States.<sup>14</sup>

### **Iran's infiltration of the West via Venezuela**

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez delivers the most vehement anti-American rhetoric in South America. To undercut what he sees as U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, Chavez crafted the "Bolivian Revolution" to unite allied states under a Socialist-leaning economic and political alliance. "[Chavez's] regime is bent on becoming a regional power, and is fanatical in its approach to dealing with the U.S.," wrote Robert Morgenthau in *The Wall Street Journal*.<sup>15</sup> Chavez is not content with developing relations

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<sup>12</sup> Col. Manuel Hurtado, Columbia's Pacific Command Chief of Staff, interview with Associated Press, "Columbia nabs fully submersible drug submarine," *Navy Times*, 11 February 2011, <http://www.navytimes.com/news/2011/02/ap-colombia-nabs-fully-submersible-drug-submarine-021511/> (accessed 17 April 2011).

<sup>13</sup> "Run Silent, Run Drugs: The Cocaine Sub Fleet," *ABC News: The Blotter*, 20 December 2007. <http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2007/12/run-silent-run.html> (accessed 26 March 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Kash and Eli White, "A New Law Counters the Semisubmersible Smuggling Threat" *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/march-2010/the-semisubmersible-smuggling-threat> (accessed 2 April 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Morgenthau, "The Emerging Axis of Iran and Venezuela," *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 September 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203440104574400792835972018.html> (accessed 26 March 2011).

just with regional partners. He is scanning globally for governments that share his ideas. He has found an ally in Iran, which is desperate to make friends who offer some support in the face of United Nations' sanctions and negative international public opinion. According to Morgenthau, "We are entering a period where the fruits of the Iran-Venezuela bond will begin to ripen."<sup>16</sup> Iran is exploiting that bond, utilizing Venezuela as a Trojan Horse to penetrate the Western Hemisphere.

The most imminent threat to the U.S. has been the infiltration of Iran into the Western Hemisphere with the support of Venezuela.<sup>17</sup> According to the April 2010 *Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran* presented to the U.S. Congress by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Iran "seeks to expand bilateral...and international relations...[to] enhance Iran's defense and deterrent capabilities" through a strategy of asymmetric retaliation and attrition warfare.<sup>18</sup> Utilizing scheduled weekly flights between Iran and Venezuela, people and equipment have entered Venezuela through negligible or non-existent customs scrutiny. Abdul Kadir, who was convicted in August 2010 of plotting to attack fuel pipelines in New York in 2007, had booked a return flight to Tehran via this connection.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the nationalization of all port facilities in Venezuela provides the opportunity for the import and export of matériel at a large scale using commercial cargo ships.<sup>20</sup> Exploiting the network created by Chavez's Bolivian Revolution and economic agreements, Iran has

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Norman A. Bailey, "What are the Persians Doing Over Here?" Challenges to Security in the Hemisphere Task Force, University of Miami Center for Hemisphere Policy, 30 March 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran," April 2010, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Dugald McConnell and Brian Todd, "Venezuela defends controversial flights to Iran and Syria," [http://articles.cnn.com/2010-08-21/world/venezuela.flights.iran\\_1\\_flights-islamic-revolutionary-guards-syria?s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-08-21/world/venezuela.flights.iran_1_flights-islamic-revolutionary-guards-syria?s=PM:WORLD) (accessed 26 March 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Norman A. Bailey, "What are the Persians Doing Over Here?" Challenges to Security in the Hemisphere Task Force, University of Miami Center for Hemisphere Policy, 30 March 2010.

spread its influence to the governments of Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Paraguay, Panama, and Nicaragua via infrastructure investments, finance, and commerce.<sup>21</sup> All of Iran's economic and political outreach to South and Central American states is effectively self-serving. These states have provided the means and locations for Iran to manufacture and smuggle weapons while conducting other activities used to finance and effect terrorist operations.<sup>22</sup> As a result of Iran's efforts to establish a foothold in the West, state-sponsored actors such as Hezbollah and the IRGC-QF are present in Venezuela and throughout the region, raising funds, creating networks and conducting clandestine operations.<sup>23</sup>

### **Hezbollah and the IRGC-QF**

Iranian sponsored actors are the mechanism for operations in Venezuela and Central America. Hezbollah is a Lebanese-based group originally founded in 1982 by members of the Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>24</sup> Hezbollah currently operates in Venezuela and other South and Central American countries, primarily as a fund-raising organization, collecting millions of dollars through narcotic production and trafficking.<sup>25</sup> Both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Drug Enforcement Agency report Hezbollah members have

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Sullivan, "Latin America: Terrorism Issues," RS21049, Congressional Research Service, 23 February 2011; John Kiriakou, "Iran forging ties to Latin America," *Houston Chronicle*, 15 November 2008, <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/editorial/outlook/6113854.html> (accessed 26 March 2011); Norman A. Bailey, "What are the Persians Doing Over Here?" Challenges to Security in the Hemisphere Task Force, University of Miami Center for Hemisphere Policy, 30 March 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Norman A. Bailey, "What are the Persians Doing Over Here?" Challenges to Security in the Hemisphere Task Force, University of Miami Center for Hemisphere Policy, 30 March 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Rene Novakoff, "Islamic Terrorist Activities in Latin America: Why the Region and the US Should be Concerned," *Air & Space Power Journal*, Spanish ed., July 2008; Department of Defense, "Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran," April 2010, p. 2, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Adam Shatz, "In Search of Hezbollah," *The New York Review of Books*, 29 April 2004, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/apr/29/in-search-of-hezbollah/?pagination=false>, (accessed 17 April 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah: narco-Islamism," Middle East Strategy at Harvard, National Security Studies Program: Weatherhead Center, 22 March 2009, <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2009/03/hezbollah-narco-islamism/> (accessed 29 March 2011).

infiltrated the United States utilizing smuggling routes built by DTOs.<sup>26</sup> Hezbollah has undoubtedly noticed the success of SPFS deliveries into the United States, highlighting an opportunity for Iranian infiltration into the U.S. With a single suitcase-sized amount of cocaine fetching approximately \$1 million, it requires very little profit to finance the construction of a single SPFS, estimated at \$2 million.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, Hezbollah has been linked to kinetic operations in South America, specifically the bombings of Israeli buildings in Brazil in 1992 and 1994.<sup>28</sup> Hezbollah provides a skilled terrorist threat with a pool of highly dedicated operatives. This capability provides an Iranian deterrent against U.S. participation or sanctioning of an attack against Iran's nuclear program.<sup>29</sup> It is Hezbollah that would implement the SPFS attacks. The IRGC-QF is the organization that will provide the training.

The IRGC-QF is used by the Iranian regime “to clandestinely exert military, political, and economic power to advance Iranian national interests abroad” by conducting “covert diplomacy, provide training, arms and financial support to surrogate groups and terrorists organizations”.<sup>30</sup> Recruited from the IRGC, the IRGC-QF is utilized in a similar manner as U.S. Special Operations Forces, training other organizations in asymmetric warfare “thereby

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<sup>26</sup> Bill Gertz, “Hizbullah building terror infrastructure in U.S., infiltrating from Mexico,” 10 June 2010, [http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2010/ss\\_terror0516\\_06\\_11.asp](http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2010/ss_terror0516_06_11.asp) (accessed 29 March 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.; Col. Manuel Hurtado, Columbia's Pacific Command Chief of Staff, interview with Associated Press, “Columbia nabs fully submersible drug submarine,” *Navy Times*, 11 February 2011, <http://www.navytimes.com/news/2011/02/ap-colombia-nabs-fully-submersible-drug-submarine-021511/>, (accessed 17 April 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Frank C. Urbancic, Jr., *Prepared Statement by the Principal Deputy Coordinator, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation of the Committee on International Relations House of Representatives, Serial No. 109-189, 13 July 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid; Dugald McConnell and Brian Todd, “Venezuela defends controversial flights to Iran and Syria,” [http://articles.cnn.com/2010-08-21/world/venezuela.flights.iran\\_1\\_flights-islamic-revolutionary-guards-syria?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-08-21/world/venezuela.flights.iran_1_flights-islamic-revolutionary-guards-syria?_s=PM:WORLD) (accessed 26 March 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Department of Defense, “Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran,” April 2010, p. 2, 8.

maintaining plausible deniability within the international community”.<sup>31</sup> IRGC-QF provides the technical and military expertise. Iran maintains a small fleet of midget submarines for use in the Arabian Gulf.<sup>32</sup> It is not a leap of logic to think the IRGC-QF can translate their knowledge of midget submarine procedures to SPFS, thereby producing a credible sub-surface, asymmetric threat to the United States.

The United States estimates it interdicts less than 1/5<sup>th</sup> of the cocaine transported to the United States.<sup>33</sup> This suggests the current number and capability of assets at the disposal of JIATF-S is not enough to support the mission.<sup>34</sup> As long as the United States views SPFS singularly as a drug trafficking law enforcement issue, the United States will not be prepared to respond militarily to an attack from a terrorist organization utilizing the same technology. It is necessary for U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) and U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) to prepare for that eventuality.

## **U.S. Response**

### **Combatant and Component Commands**

The Caribbean Sea contains the geographical boundary of USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM. These two commands have made tremendous strides to blend and reduce the vulnerabilities inherent in that seam.<sup>35</sup> However, if an SPFS or multiple SPFS were loaded with weapons of mass destruction/ explosion (WMD/E) instead of narcotics and

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Steven Reich, “The Threat of Midget Subs Today,” *NOVA*, 01 December 2009, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/military/threat-midget-subs.html> (accessed 2 April 2011); Joe Pappalardo, “Is the U.S. Prepared to Face Midget Subs?” *Popular Mechanics*, 27 May 2010, <http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/military/news/midget-sub-attacks> (accessed 2 April 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Author’s observation while assigned to Joint Interagency Task Force-South from December 2004-June 2005.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.jiatsf.southcom.mil/index.aspx> (accessed 4 April 2011).

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Southern Command 2011 Posture Statement, p. 11.

sent toward the U.S. would the combatant commands and their partner organizations be able to respond adequately? Currently, forces assigned to the combatant commanders operate to support the law enforcement role of the U.S. Coast Guard to counter the DTO threat. The law enforcement approach has not sufficiently countered the semisubmersible threat. Combatant commanders must prepare a more robust military response that will adequately stop a submersible in the Caribbean.

Due to their allocated resources and the substantial size of the geography involved, neither USNORTHCOM nor USSOUTHCOM is independently prepared to respond to the SPFS threat. However, both combatant commands include component commands, which together provide considerable opposition to the SPFS threat. USSOUTHCOM's Joint Interagency Task Force – South (JIATF-S) and USNORTHCOM's Joint Intelligence Operations Center – North (JIOC-North) and Joint Task Force – North (JTF-North) are highly resourceful and have the necessary architecture and independent mission expertise to provide an enhanced layered defense of the United States. That said, there are important shortfalls in intelligence coordination and assets allocation to be overcome. Command and Control (C2) and intelligence sharing are well-designed and facilitated by the implementation of joint doctrine but neither are tailored nor exercised to respond to a military-orientated SPFS threat.

USSOUTHCOM maintains an “area of focus”<sup>36</sup> consisting of the nations within Central and South America. In contrast to the circumstances in the Central Command (CENTCOM) AOR, USSOUTHCOM does not regard a nation-on-nation war as the most

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<sup>36</sup> “Area of focus” is the term utilized on the USSOUTHCOM website. For the purpose of this paper, I will continue to use the term “responsibility” so the acronym “AOR” remains valid.

probable threat to regional stability and the security of the United States. Rather, USSOUTHCOM is concerned about the “asymmetric threats posed by non-state actors.”<sup>37</sup> DTOs have been the prime example of this concern and the main target of pursuit since the 1980s. As the combatant commander responsible for protecting the southern approach to the United States, USSOUTHCOM stood up a component command to deal specifically with the DTO threat.

JIATF-S is “responsible for the detection and monitoring (DM) of suspect air and maritime drug activity as well as the collection, processing, and dissemination of counter drug information for interagency and partner nation operations.”<sup>38</sup> It was praised by the former Commander of USSOUTHCOM as “the epitome of interagency cooperation”.<sup>39</sup> Members from assorted intelligence agencies and liaison officers from various U.S. and allied militaries are present in the command building, providing a convergence of people and talent working toward the single objective of providing military detection and monitoring assistance to law enforcement agencies to curb narcotics trafficking in the AOR.<sup>40</sup>

To conduct the DM mission, JIATF-S has tactical control (TACON) of a limited number of U.S. Navy and Coast Guard ships and aircraft provided by the military components within USSOUTHCOM’s AOR. None of JIATF-S’s assets are organic; therefore the command suffers from a shortfall of pieces it can move on the chessboard of the AOR. The majority of U.S. Navy assets remain under control of U.S. Fourth Fleet, the Navy component of USSOUTHCOM. JIATF-S will not have enough assets at its disposal to

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<sup>37</sup> <http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/pages/theaterSecurity.php> (accessed 19 April 2011).

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/pages/counterNarco.php> (accessed 4 April 2011).

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.southcom.mil/appssc/news.php?storyId=413> (accessed 4 April 2011).

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.jiatfs.southcom.mil/index.aspx> (accessed 19 April 2011).

saturate the Caribbean Sea to conduct a visual search for a SPFS loaded with a WMD/E, even if intelligence queuing could narrow the search area.

USNORTHCOM is the supported command for the maritime military defense of the United States which gives USNORTHCOM operational control over all assets stationed in the U.S. should the need arise.<sup>41</sup> USNORTHCOM commands JTF-North which provides military support to law enforcement against threats approaching the United States.<sup>42</sup> To aid in its domain awareness, USNORTHCOM maintains JIOC-North as a hub for intelligence and DOD-related law enforcement information where USNORTHCOM can disseminate information to organizations at all levels concerning both non-state and state-sponsored threats.<sup>43</sup> Working in concert, JIATF-S, JTF-North, and JIOC-North provide the backbone for the defense of the nation against an SPFS attack.

### **Locating the SPFS**

The best odds to intercept an SPFS will be as close to the source country as possible. Timely receipt of intelligence at JIATF-S reduces the search area. JIATF-S normally operates in support of law enforcement agencies to interdict narcotic smugglers, therefore personnel involved in intelligence collection and assessment at JIATF-S are accustomed to focusing on that material. The detection of an IRGC-QF SPFS will most likely differ from typical narcotic SPFS queuing since different intelligence agencies may be more involved than usual. A threat of this nature potentially has long lines of communication originating from CENTCOM AOR. Cooperation between JIATF-S and JIOC-North is essential in this

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<sup>41</sup> U.S. Northern Command 2010 Posture Statement, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 3-4.

case. JIOC-North liaises with the National Counterterrorism Center, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Joint Terrorism Task Force, and the Department of Homeland Security in addition to national intelligence organizations.<sup>44</sup> Interaction of this sort should facilitate the critical dissemination of relevant intelligence. Utilizing eGuardian, an FBI system developed to disseminate potential terror threats on an unclassified network, JIATF-S and other organizations can be notified of looming threats and instigate the necessary response.<sup>45</sup>

An open ocean search for an SPFS is an extraordinarily difficult challenge due to the disparities between the factors of force and space. As previously described, SPFS operate just below the surface of the water. This significantly reduces the radar cross-section of the craft even in comparison to the self-propelled semi-submersible. Concurrently, active and passive sonar acquisition is difficult as SPFS operate at a much shallower depth than traditional submarines for which sonobouys were designed. JIATF-S is attempting to modify Coast Guard acoustic sensors based on tests conducted on a captured SPFS.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, assuming military levels of discipline by the crew of an SPFS carrying a WMD/E, the exploitation of signals intelligence to locate an SPFS at sea will be limited to downright ineffective.

Weighed against the success of the other possibilities of detection, visual acquisition, although handicapped, remains the best prospect. The only visual indications are the disturbances of the water caused by the exposed periscope and snorkel during transit or

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Brian Ross et al., "Run Silent, Run Drugs: The Cocaine Sub Fleet," ABC News: The Blotter, 20 December 2007, <http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2007/12/run-silent-run.html> (accessed 26 March 2011).

perhaps a glimpse of the craft through the clear water during a low sea-state by aircraft at a low enough altitude. Considering the size of the protrusions, they are easily lost in the clutter of breaking waves in a moderate sea-state. To mitigate these shortfalls, a significant increase in the normal forces allocated to JIATF-S for detection is required.

In the event intelligence indicates a terrorist operated SPFS is underway in the Caribbean Sea, the United States will need to flood the water space with assets. USSOUTHCOM has Fourth Fleet at its disposal, however the Fleet may be deployed anywhere in the AOR, perhaps as far as the opposite side of the South American continent. The response time to an SPFS threat is less than 10 days, considering an average cruising speed of 10 knots and the distance from the coast of Venezuela to Miami, Florida, and Mobile, Alabama. Unless USSOUTHCOM maintains a consistent fleet presence in the Caribbean Sea, assets will not be able to respond and arrive in the search area in time.

While USNORTHCOM can call up the forces stationed in the U.S., the actual numbers of units responding may not be very large. With the pace of operations in CENTCOM AOR, Navy, Air Force, and Army units who are in the U.S. are usually in a state of re-constitution having returned recently from a deployment. Navy ships in particular may be undergoing lengthy periods of maintenance and therefore unable to put to sea. Surge capable assets are usually sent to CENTCOM or Pacific Command AORs, therefore depleting any deployable units maintained in the U.S. Decision makers need to plan for this eventuality and ensure enough trained assets are available in the U.S. to respond to a crisis near the homeland. Long range search and patrol aircraft from the Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard will be required, specifically P-3s, C-130s, and UAVs. Helicopter-capable surface craft from the Navy and Coast Guard should put to sea as well. Special Operations

Forces trained in WMD/E response should also be put on alert and ready to deploy either to the surface ships or to a C-130 base where they can be delivered by parachute. Commercial petroleum platforms often ferry employees back and forth from the mainland by private helicopters. Pilots of these helicopters can assist the military by searching the water along their transit routes and reporting any suspicious contacts.<sup>47</sup> The Advanced Deployable System (ADS), “a deployable undersea surveillance system composed of distributed fields of sensors that can be rapidly and unobtrusively deployed in regional contingency areas” namely in the littoral, would have been a fantastic tool to locate SPFS if it had not been cancelled in October 2006 for cost overrun.<sup>48</sup>

### **Issues for the Decision-maker**

Although the decision to protect America from attack is a simple one, ensuring the United States is prepared to do so is difficult. The nation’s high level decision-makers need to address some difficult topics. Is the United States prepared to conduct a military response in the Caribbean Sea on short notice? Current assets assigned to JIATF-S act in support of law enforcement activities. Subsequently, the submersible threat is generally relegated to a law enforcement issue. Gen. Fraser, Commander USSOUTHCOM, articulated that position specifically to reporters on 30 March 2011, “From our standpoint, [fully submersibles] are a law enforcement issue. [O]ur role from a U.S. military standpoint is detection and

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<sup>47</sup> Conversation with Maj. Christian “Kit” Martin, U.S. Army, 4 April 2011.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.fas.org/irp/program/collect/ads.htm>, 26 October 1999 (accessed 19 April 2011); <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=10714>, 9 April 2007 (accessed 19 April 2011); This subject is beyond the scope of this paper, but the cancellation of ADS (an important capability both tactically and operationally) is indicative of the lack of focus on critical Navy missions of Anti-submarine Warfare and warfare in the littoral environment.

monitoring.”<sup>49</sup> Until there is a shift in policy that SPFS are a national security threat which require a change in approach, the proper assets and weapon systems will not be properly allocated. USSOUTHCOM must increase the number of U.S. naval forces operating in the Caribbean Sea, even at the expense of other missions within the AOR.

Will intelligence products differentiating between DTO/ law enforcement targets and terror/ military targets be available and detailed enough to assist National Command Authority to commit the appropriate response? The attention of our military and political leaders is focused on North Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific.<sup>50</sup> What attention is paid to South and Central America is in the form of Humanitarian Assistance, Theater Cooperation, and counter-narcotics operations.<sup>51</sup> The United States has been lulled into a rut of predictability regarding South America, therefore enhancing the vulnerability of the southern coast of the United States to the threat of asymmetric attack by state-sponsored terrorists. Intelligence agencies need to continually scrutinize, monitor and disseminate information from all areas of the globe as terror networks have also globalized.

Does an appropriate command and control relationship exist between USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM to ensure responding assets will be used effectively over the entire Caribbean Sea and not just combatant command AOR? This is one aspect where the United States is prepared. Drawn from USSOUTHCOM’s 2011 Posture Statement, both commands orchestrate operations in order to prevent the exploitation of

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<sup>49</sup> Gen. Douglas Fraser, News Briefing from the Pentagon, 30 March 2011, <http://www.southcom.mil/appssc/news.php?storyId=2603> (accessed 1 April 2011).

<sup>50</sup> Author’s conclusions from presentations given during 2011 Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance Symposium, 8 April 2011.

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.southcom.mil/appssc/pages/ourMission.php> (accessed 19 April 2011).

seams and coordinate the employment of resources.<sup>52</sup> According to the USNORTHCOM 2010 Posture Statement, it is essential to maintain the ways and means to quickly respond to queuing and intercept targets of interest as far from U.S. shores as possible.<sup>53</sup> The command is developing a concept of operations to provide the capability to respond on short notice to an asymmetric threat in close proximity to the United States.<sup>54</sup> When U.S. assets respond to a terrorist SPFS in the Caribbean Sea, an adequate command and control structure will properly employ them while mitigating any “red tape”.

## **Conclusion**

The attacks of September 11, 2001 were a reminder of the importance of homeland defense. However, the long standing conflict against terrorism has kept the U.S. engrossed in the Middle East, while conflicting political, military, and economic issues fixate the U.S on the Western Pacific. In doing so, the United States has left the nation’s southern flank exposed. Iran is taking advantage of its relationship with Venezuela to build a network of Hezbollah and IRGC-QF in South and Central America.

The advancement of smuggling technology by DTOs has produced a gap in the capability of the United States to effectively respond and defend its borders. USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM must continue to work together to diminish this gap and neutralize the threat of an SPFS attack from the Caribbean Sea. United States military forces need to maintain a significant presence in the Caribbean Sea to provide a measure of deterrence and the ability to respond with appropriate force. Intelligence agencies need to

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<sup>52</sup> U.S. Southern Command 2011 Posture Statement, p. 11.

<sup>53</sup> U.S. Northern Command 2010 Posture Statement, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

continually assess their levels of cooperation to ensure vital information and queuing reaches applicable actors.

Law enforcement officials recognize the threat SPFS pose to the United States by how easily they can infiltrate territorial waters.<sup>55</sup> JIATF-S interdicts only twenty percent of the narcotics en route to the United States. This is disappointing as a law enforcement issue, but is disastrous under the pretenses of a terrorist WMD/E threat. It is essential military and political leaders recognize the shortfalls of the current detection and interdiction efforts and ensure a commensurate response to protect the United States.

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<sup>55</sup> Steven Reich, "The Threat of Midget Subs Today," *NOVA*, 01 December 2009, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/military/threat-midget-subs.html> (accessed 2 April 2011).

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